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CHARACTERIZATION IN *CLARISSA HARLOWE*

During the hundred and fifty odd years since the publication of Richardson's masterpiece *Clarissa Harlowe*, there has been an interesting alternation of opinion on the part of his readers as to the realistic value of the character-drawing of this retiring, sentimental printer. We have before us interesting documentary evidence of various conspicuous parties to the discussion; we may compare the definite pronouncement of intention which the author himself makes in his meticulous preface to the novel, with the opinions of several friends and contemporaries recorded in his correspondence—a valuable literary record, edited by Mrs. Barbauld and published in 1804 (but unfortunately never reprinted)—and in the letters and diaries of Dr. Johnson and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. And we may also bring forward for comparison the opinion of latter-day critics such as Hazlitt, Sir Leslie Stephen, Augustine Birrell, and W. D. Howells. The characters about whom opinion has been most positive and most diverse are, of course, *Clarissa* herself, *Lovelace* the villain, and *Miss Howe*, the confidante of the heroine.

Richardson, always ready to devote ample time to the portrayal of his characters, through dialogue, self-analysis, the comment of other characters, and footnotes by the author, surpasses all his other efforts in the fulness and exactness of his delineation of *Clarissa's* character. In addition to the solicitous attention given her throughout the course of the story, the author makes an additional effort in a "Postscript" to justify her according to the canons of real life, waiving as uncomprehending the criticism, which evidently existed even in his own day, that the "incomparable lady" was not entirely a product of this world. He writes with almost petulant insistence: "Some there are, and ladies too! who have supposed that the excellencies of the heroine are carried to an improbable and even an impracticable height in the History. But the education of *Clarissa* from *early childhood* ought to be considered as one of her very great advantages;

and indeed the very foundation of *all* her excellencies; and it is hoped for the sake of the doctrine designed to be inculcated by it, that it will. . . . It must be confessed that we are not to look for *Clarissa's* among the constant frequenters of Ranelagh and Vauxhall, nor among those who may be called *daughters of the card table*. If we do the character of the heroine may then indeed be justly thought not only improbable, but unattainable. But we have neither room in this place, nor inclination, to pursue a subject so invidious. We quit it therefore after we have *repeated* that we *know* there are *some*, and we hope there are *many* in the British Dominion . . . who as far as occasion has called upon them to exert the like *humble and modest yet steady and useful* virtues, have reached the perfection of *Clarissa*."¹

Evidently from many devoted readers of his own time Richardson secured a satisfactory conformity to his opinions. The singular unanimity with which several famous literary personages of the period unite in affirming that *Clarissa* is a "natural character" lead one to reflect on the possibility of a higher level of behavior than the middle of the eighteenth century is usually credited with, or a lower order of discernment.

Foremost and best known among these contemporary criticisms is Boswell's record of a conversation with Dr. Johnson on the merits of Richardson and Fielding. Boswell writes: "It always appeared to me that he (Johnson) estimated the compositions of Richardson too highly, and that he had an unreasonable prejudice against Fielding. In comparing those two writers, he used this expression: 'that there was as great difference between them as between a man who knew how a watch was made and a man who could tell the hour by looking at the dial plate.' This was a short and figurative statement of his distinction between drawing characters of nature and characters only of manners. But I cannot help being of opinion that the real watches of Fielding are as well constructed as the large clocks of Richardson, and that his dial plates are brighter. Fielding's characters though they do not expand themselves so widely in dissertation are just pictures

¹ *Clarissa Harlowe*. Tauchnitz Edition, IV, 499.

of human nature, and I will venture to say, have more striking features, and nicer touches of the pencil.”² Boswell’s judgment, indeed, accords with that of many a modern reader, but Dr. Johnson, in this as in other matters, voiced the general opinion of his own age.

The captious, critical Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, far-traveler and writer of letters, a luckless friend of Pope and avowedly not an admirer of Richardson, writes: “The two first tomes of *Clarissa* touched me as being very resembling to my maiden days.”³ Miss Sara Fielding, a loyal admirer and correspondent of Richardson’s, though the sister of his great and unduly hated rival, writes to Richardson of *Clarissa*: “When I read of her I am all sensation; my heart glows; I am overwhelmed; my only vent is tears; and unless tears could mark my thoughts as legibly as ink, I cannot speak half I feel. I become like the Harlowe’s servant, when he spoke not; he could not speak; he looked, he bowed, and withdrew.”⁴ Perhaps this excessive veneration is hardly such as Miss Fielding would accord to an individual of her own world, yet the unreality of *Clarissa*’s character is not so pronounced in her mind as to destroy the illusion.

Mrs. Barbauld, Richardson’s biographer, herself a prominent literary figure of the time, writes: “We regard the characters as real personages, whom we know and converse with, and whose fate remains to be decided in the course of events.” Yet she goes on to say of the chief of these “real personages”: “The character of *Clarissa* is all along very highly wrought; she has all the grace of dignity and delicacy of a finished model of female excellence.”⁵ Thus, whoever may have been the crude and indiscriminating “some” (“and ladies too”!) for whose benefit Richardson wrote his defence in the Postscript, the recorded judgment of his peers, with the exception of the unassuming Boswell, evidently supported

² Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson*, Everyman’s Library. 1, 343.

³ *Letters of Lady Montagu*, Everyman’s Library, p. 461.

⁴ Barbauld, *Correspondence of Samuel Richardson* (London, 1804) II, 60.

⁵ *Correspondence*, I, LXXXII.

the author's own contention that the character of *Clarissa* bears the marks of reality.

Compare with these contemporary tributes certain comments of the nineteenth century. Hazlitt, in his lecture on "The English Novelists" in the series of lectures on "The English Comic Writer" delivered in 1818 says:

"I should suppose that never sympathy more deep or sincere was excited than by the heroine of Richardson's romance, except by the calamities of real life. The links in this wonderful chain of interests are not more finely wrought than their whole weight is overwhelming and irresistible. Who can forget the exquisite gradations of her long dying-scene, or the closing of the coffin-lid when Miss Howe comes to take her last leave of her friend; or the heart-breaking reflection that *Clarissa* makes on what was to have been her wedding day? Well does a certain writer exclaim:

'Books are a real world, both pure and good,
Round which, with tendrils strong as flesh and blood,
Our pastimes and our happiness may grow.'"⁶

Sir Leslie Stephen, in the keen, comprehensive introductory essays in his edition of Richardson's complete works,⁷ satirizes happily Miss Howe's glowing panegyrics upon the heroine; yet he himself goes on to sum up *Clarissa*'s character prosaically, without suggestion of its unreality. He writes: "Miss Harlowe appears to us as, in the main, a healthy, sensible country girl, with sound sense, the highest respect for decorum, and an exaggerated regard for constituted, especially paternal authority." Perhaps, however, we may accept this description as a half facetious judgment, set, as it is, in a context of mingled satire and keenly critical analysis.

Augustine Birrell in an essay on Richardson in his volume *Res Judicatae*, compares *Clarissa* and Fielding's heroines to the great advantage of the former, accepting without cavil the effectiveness of her exalted excellence: "Sophia Western," he says, "was, as we have seen, a comely girl enough,

⁶ Hazlitt, *Collected Works*, Ed. by A. R. Waller and A. Glover (London, 1903) VIII, 120.

⁷ Complete Works of Samuel Richardson, edited by Sir Leslie Stephen, London, 1883. 12 vols.

but she was as much like Clarissa as a ship in dock is like a ship at sea and on fire.”⁸

But Mr. Howells caps the climax of this serious commendation of Clarissa’s naturalness when he writes in his *Heroines in Fiction*: “Clarissa Harlowe, in spite of her eighteenth century costume and keeping, remains a masterpiece in the portraiture of that ever-womanly, which is of all times and places. The form of the novel in which she appears, the epistolary form, is of all forms the most averse to the apparent unconsciousness of so fascinating a heroine, yet the cunning of Richardson (it was in some things an unrivalled cunning) triumphs over the form, and shows us Clarissa with no more pose than she would confront herself with in the glass.”⁹ One wonders whether Mr. Howells, in his preparation of these volumes for the holiday trade, found time to reread many of the seven volumes in which Clarissa achieves her task of self-revelation with such “apparent unconsciousness.” Natural she may have seemed to contemporary readers, whose criteria were based upon the lofty ladies of Romance, the vaguely drawn heroine of the picaresque stories, and Fielding’s women objectively portrayed; but it is hard to believe that a modern critic, familiar with realistic heroines from Elizabeth Bennet, Ethel Newcome, Maggie Tulliver, to the American girls of his own creating, could see in Clarissa “no more pose than she could confront herself with in the glass.” Yet Mr. Howell’s statement may contain a truth more true than he intended, for it seems probable that the looking-glass itself must reflect Clarissa the heroine, in stately pose, poised, ready for her pedestal!

Such is the consensus of opinion as represented by notable readers of the *History of Clarissa* up to the present time. Before the rising generation accepts, however, the testimony of leisurely critics of the past—for it is safe to assume that but a small number of present-day readers will seek complete first hand evidence on the character of Clarissa—let us test Richardson’s heroine by certain possible prototypes.

⁸ Birrill, *Res Judicatae* (New York, 1892) p. 23.

⁹ Howells, *Heroines in Fiction*, (New York, 1901) I, 3.

To my mind, *Clarissa* is heir to the triumphant grandeur of the heroines of Heroic Tragedy in the seventeenth century, and the noble self-immolation of Sentimental Comedy of the early eighteenth. The delineation of her character is a piece of epic-heightening, achieved in accordance with former models, but adapted to an eighteenth century purpose. We can trace the kinship between *Clarissa* and the seventeenth century heroines of Scudéry and the French romancers, and the writers of English Heroic Tragedy—notably Dryden. Compare the raptures over *Clarissa's* beauty, with the minute descriptions of "the women of Granada" and the "Fair Semahris" in Scudéry's *Almahida, or the Captive Queen*,¹⁰ and of Chrysalia and Claricia in *Clélie* by the same author. *Almahida* herself embodies many of *Clarissa's* most conspicuous virtues, "a noble pride," and a desire to be "at her own disposal to marry," a strong sense of paternal authority. *Semahris*, another heroine of the same romance, exhibits a decorous reserve which is described by her baffled lover much in the manner of *Lovelace*: "She must be very dainty indeed (answered *Almador*, finding himself nipped to the quick) that can brook nothing but what pleases her fancy; and would deprive herself of all things that are delightful to free herself from those things for which she has no kindness. This is indeed a mark of niceness of the fair *Semahris's* humour."

In *Clélia*, another Scudéry romance, we have a heroine who is a striking prototype of *Clarissa* in many points of character and situation. See, for instance, the condition resulting from her reception of a letter from the lover opposed by her father: "This letter gave much joy to *Clelia*, but withal it augmented her persecution; for *Clelius* [the father] understanding it, told her she was infinitely culpable for receiving it, that there could no longer be an innocent correspondence between her and *Aronces*, since himself prohibited it; and that Rome having daily greater obligations to *Horatius*, it behoov'd her to look upon him as the man that was infallibly to marry her at the end of the war. *Clelia* answered to this speech of her

¹⁰ Scudéry, *Almahida, or the Captive Queen*, translated by J. Phillips, London, 1677.

father with her accustomed constancy; and though she said nothing inconsistent with the respect she ow'd to such a relation, yet withal she said nothing prejudicial to the fidelity she promised to her lover."¹¹ Later she is endangered through abduction by one Sextus, and immediately she betrays that decisive preference for death to dishonor, which all heroic ladies are given opportunity to display. After parting with her accepted lover, we see her in the attitude of a noble grief characteristic of her kind:¹² "Never was seen so sad a person as she on this occasion; but her melancholy was accompanied with so much discretion that it caused the greater compassion." And finally she speaks before the Roman Senate "with so resolute and generous an aspect, that all who beheld her, judged she deserved greater honor than the senate had decreed her." Thus the exaltation of Clelia is accomplished by universal commendation, much as that of Clarissa is achieved through universal lamentation.

In the heroines of Dryden's heroic tragedies also we find elements similar to Clarissa's character and situation. A lofty contempt for unworthy love characterizes all these heroines, and growing out of it, an untempered scorn for the unworthy lover, and a glorious willingness to die in self-defense. Almeyda in *Don Sebastian* says:

"My virtue is a guard beyond my strength,
And death, my last defense, within my call.

.

I'll venture landing on that happy shore,
With an unsullied body and white mind.

If I have erred, some kind inhabitant

Will pity a strayed soul to take me home."¹³

Compare this with Clarissa's attitude in the dramatic pen-knife scene, which Lovelace recounts, beginning: "'Stop where thou art, O vilest and most abandoned of men! Stop where thou art!'" She held forth a pen-knife in her hand, the point to her own bosom, grasping resolutely the

¹¹ Scudéry, *Clélia*. Translated, London, 1670, page 598.

¹² *Ibid.*, page 732.

¹³ Dryden, *Poetical Works*, edited by Scott and Saintsbury, Edinburgh, 1882. III:364.

whole handle so that there was no offering to take it from her."¹⁴

But more than the royally amorous ladies who people most of these tragedies, the cold, dispassionate Clarissa resembles the martyred Saint Catherine of *Tyrannic Love*. Compare Maximin's words,

"See where she comes with that high air and mien

Which marks in bonds the greatness of a queen,"¹⁵

with Lovelace's description of Clarissa's entrance: "Then hear her step toward us and instantly see her enter among us, confiding in her own innocence, with a majesty in her person and manner that is natural to her; but which then shone out in all its glory."

The heroine of *Tyrannic Love* also utters many sententious moral reflections in keeping with her high religious faith, which remind us of Clarissa's preparation for death, as does her anxiety to divorce herself from earthly ties and seek a heavenly recompense. Both heroines feel the same responsibility to live up to their high calling, to set a worthy example to a waiting world.

The same elements of mind and temperament, the elevation of diction, the tragic extravagance of feeling, the conscious integrity of virtue, which marks these tragic heroines of high degree, remote in time and place, the writers of Sentimental Comedy translated into the mode of human life. The scene is changed from Rome and Granada in the early Christian era, to London of the early eighteenth century; the hero is no longer an emperor or a triumphant general, but a perfect gentleman, as regal and as victorious as his predecessors. The virtuous heroine is no longer reserved for a tragic death, but now is destined to a fit reward on earth; yet she mourns in early life an unkind fate¹⁶ and "wraps herself up in the integrity of her own heart" until chance and paternal sanction present a lover of honourable intent. This type of comedy, which is a link between the Heroic Drama of the seven-

¹⁴ Clarissa Harlowe III, 271.

¹⁵ Dryden, *Op. Cit.*: III, 403.

¹⁶ Steele, Richard, *The Conscious Lovers*. Mermaid Series, New York, 1894, p. 312.

teenth century, and the realistic Laughing Comedy of the later eighteenth, suggests the relation of Richardson's work to the early romancers and to the novels of Fielding, Smollett, Goldsmith, and the later realists. Richardson, too, set his scenes in the contemporary life he knew; the majority of his characters he chose from the middle class world about him; but, like the writers of Sentimental Comedy, his heroine, Clarissa, he deliberately exalted above the rest. Her character he drew from nobler models; her mind and her situation exhibit the virtues of those older heroines; her diction is of the same elevated style; her appearance and her actions command a similar reverence; and her death, anticipated with a similar delight, redounds equally to her glory.

This exaltation of Clarissa's character I maintain was pre-meditated, consistent, and sustained to suit the author's purpose. Richardson himself tells us in his preface that "the principal of these two young ladies is proposed to us as an exemplar to her sex." In a footnote¹⁷ he repeats this statement, and the same idea is conspicuous in his correspondence. The problem, then, resolves itself into a question whether a heroine can be drawn intentionally as a model of virtue and an example of supreme excellence, and yet be realistic. In answer let us see in what manner she is portrayed in the course of the narration. In her first letter Miss Howe describes Clarissa as "A young lady whose distinguished merits have made her the public care," as excelling all her sex, as one whom every eye is fixed upon, "with the expectation of an example." Mrs. Howe is reported as saying, "Miss Clarissa Harlowe is an admirable young lady; wherever she goes she confers a favor; whomever she leaves she fills with regret."¹⁸ Aunt Hervey addresses her reverently: "Rise, my noble-minded niece! charming creature! . . . kneel not to me."¹⁹

Lovelace himself declares: "No age from the first to the present, ever produced, nor will the future to the end of the world, I dare aver, ever produce a young blooming lady, tried as she has been tried, who has stood all the trials as she has

¹⁷ *Clarissa Harlowe* IV, 430.

¹⁸ *Clarissa Harlowe* I, 44.

¹⁹ *Clarissa Harlowe* I, 217.

done—let me tell you, sir, that you never saw, never knew, never heard of such another woman as Miss Harlowe.”²⁰ And indeed we are most of us willing to agree heartily with Lovelace, and in this agreement lies our common faith in the incredibility of such a character. Rare, miraculous, isolated by her virtue, as her friends declare her to be; justified in all her actions by her own revelations and the careful notes of the author; established as a fountain-head of wisdom and excellent discernment by the counsel she gives, the meditations she writes, and the sententious utterances that are quoted from her; she is still further exalted by her suffering, and finally transfigured in the manner of her death. In his correspondence, in a letter to Miss Highmore, Richardson admits his deliberate intention of enhancing Clarissa’s merit by means of her suffering. “You will be the less surprised, madam, that these strict notions are mine, when you will recollect, that in the poor ineffectual History of Clarissa, the parents are made more cruel, more implacable, more punishable in short, in order to inculcate this very doctrine that the want of duty on one side enhances the merit on the other, when it is performed, and you see how Clarissa shines in hers; nor loses sight of her gratitude and love, cruel as they were in the nineteenth year of her life, for their kindness and favour to her in the preceding eighteen.”²¹ Surely here is no true intention of realistic portraiture. Richardson is not drawing from life but from an ideal, loath as he is to admit it.

Lovelace is in some respects a more complicated problem for the author than Clarissa. As Sir Leslie Stephen points out, the difficulty lies in composing “a villain who shall be by nature a Devil and yet capable of imposing upon an angel.” Richardson’s solution of this problem brought with it a result he neither expected nor desired. The keynote of Lovelace’s character is pride, with all its ramifications of vanity, self-love, love of power, disdain of opposition and control; on this fundamental trait is built the motives of his complicated villainy. But he is also endowed with a pleasing person, an amiable manner, a specious humility mixed with

²⁰ *Clarissa Harlowe* III, 441.

²¹ *Correspondence* II:217.

reckless daring, and an insinuating need of reform which not only attracted the lady of his choice, but also won the hearts of many fair readers, to the infinite chagrin of the author. Lady Bradshaigh writes to Richardson, "But you must know (though I shall blush again) that if I was to die for it, I cannot help being fond of Lovelace. A sad dog! Why would you make him so wicked and yet so agreeable? He says somewhere or other he designs being a good man, from which words I have great hope; and in excuse for my liking him, I must say, I have made him so, up to my own heart's wish; a faultless, faultless husband have I made him, even without danger of a relapse. A foolish rake may die one; but a sensible rake must reform, at least in the hands of a sensible author it ought to be so and will, I hope."²² To this Richardson replies, "And did you not perceive that in the very first letter of Lovelace, all those seeds of wickedness were thick sown which sprouted up into action afterwards in his character? Pride, revenge, a love of intrigue, plot, contrivance; and who is it that asks, *Do men gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles?* On this consideration it has been a matter of surprise and indeed of some concern, that this character has met with so much favour from the good and virtuous, even as it stands from his two or three first letters; and in some measure convinced me of the necessity of such a catastrophe as I have made."²³

But Richardson need not have felt concern merely for misplaced admiration on the part of the "good and virtuous," for about this time we find Colley Cibber writing to him in a similar strain: "Lovelace's letter, page 52, has thrown out such lively strokes of his uncommon and yet natural character, such almost justifiable sentiments of his intended treatment of Clarissa, that scarce a libertine reader will forbear to triumph with him over the too charming and provoking delicacy of his Clarissa. I am in the same rapture with Miss Howe's reply to her narrator, page 60. I have not patience to dwell on its particular parts that have seized upon my approbation."²⁴

²² *Correspondence*, IV:180.

²³ *Correspondence*, IV:107.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, II:167.

Miss Howe has a chance to be the most natural character in the book, because she escapes almost entirely any share of the author's purpose. Her function is to act as interlocutor, eulogist, and in between times, as an element of relief; hence she is permitted to develop her own personality without restraint. Vivacious, headstrong, ardent in her loyalties and antipathies, she is a realistically lovable character. She is portrayed, too, in a less obvious and more incidental way than either of the principals: by stray hints, glimpses of her home life, impulsive expressions of her friendly devotion, spirited reports of her fearless encounters with the forces of the enemy. And Richardson, too, seems to appreciate this by-product of his brain, for he writes to Lady Bradshaigh: "I love Miss Howe next to Clarissa; and I see very evidently in your letters that you are the true sister of that lady. And indeed I adore your spirit and your earnestness."²⁵ Lady Montagu, however, possibly piqued by the tribute of tears wrung from her by Clarissa's own character, writes scathingly of this minor heroine: "Richardson is as ignorant in morality as he is in anatomy, when he declares abusing an obliging husband or an indulgent parent to be an innocent recreation. Miss Anne Howe and Charlotte Grandison are recommended as patterns of charming pleasantry, and applauded by his saint-like dames who mistake pert folly for wit and humor, impudence and ill-nature for spirit and fire."²⁶

Clarissa, Lovelace, and Miss Howe are the only characters portrayed subjectively. Belford is never fully realized, either in his early rakish days, or in the later days of his reforms, or in the future foretold him when the hand of Miss Montagu is his dubious reward. The other characters are all realized from without, and portrayed in broad, unshaded lines. The members of her family, Clarissa introduces to us early in none too favorable a light, and her unhappy evidence is reinforced by the comments of Miss Howe and Lovelace. There is nothing subtle or subjective in the delineation of these characters, and there need not be, for their rôle is crude and

²⁵ *Correspondence*, IV:194.

²⁶ Letters, page 465.

unconcealed. Mrs. Harlowe is a weak, unhappy soul, totally subject to the tyranny of her gouty lord. Taine delights in the brutality of what he considers typical Britishers and writes with picturesque gusto of father and son: "Above the outbursts of his voice we hear the loud wrath of his son, a sort of plethoric, over-fed bull-dog," and Arabella he describes as endowed with "the venomous bitterness of an offended, ugly woman."

Yet whether we of the present believe or disbelieve in the naturalness which Richardson's greatest admirers have claimed for his principal characters, we cannot but be impressed with the delight with which competent judges have read this tragedy, seven volumes long in the original edition and even now presented to us in four of goodly size. A writer of Richardson's own day, Edwards by name, the author of "Canons of Criticism," wrote to "the author of *Clarissa*,"—as Richardson was generally known—: "I have read, and as long as I have eyes will read, all your three most excellent pieces at least once a year." Lady Bradshaigh made a similar promise naïvely as a bribe to the author to save his heroine from the doom foretold. After the first four volumes of the novel had appeared, she opened her correspondence with Richardson under an assumed name, risking the invidious distinction of correspondence with an author to plead against this tragedy which she felt was imminent, concluding with a postscript: "If you should think fit to alter your scheme, I will promise to read your history over at least once in two years as long as I live; and my last words are—be merciful."²⁷

Thus in its own day the book was popular both because of its didactic purpose and in spite of it. The plot commanded absorbing and anxious interest, the characters appealed intensely to personal sympathy and enthusiasm, the incident was as powerfully affecting as details out of real life. Why is it that today the book has taken rank among those that all should know about but few should read? Is it that to our taste, the technique is too weak, or is its purpose too strong? Or is it rather, that the temper of our time prevents

²⁷ *Correspondence*, IV:177.

our giving the book that just and leisurely attention for which it was designed? If we could but divest ourselves of our appetite for epitomized pleasure, of our habit of tense, impatient endeavor, our crude disdain of full, unhurried speech, we could perhaps judge with more righteous judgment such products of a more deliberate time, and find in the elongated novel of the eighteenth century the delight that Tennyson felt in "those great, still books," fulfilling more nearly Dr. Johnson's sanguine prophecy, that "Clarissa is not a performance to be read with eagerness and laid aside forever, but will be occasionally consulted by the busy, the aged, and the studious."²⁸

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²⁸ *Correspondence*, V:282.